Split Ends
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Split Ends

by BulletproofDress

Summary

It's been several months after Ranma and Akane's failed wedding, and the Wrecking Crew have all been quiet as they've kept their distance. However, things aren't quiet for long, as an attempt to return to the status quo backfires and Ranma is more upset than ever. Realizing that the old normal was bad, actually, Shampoo makes a confession that starts to change the relationships between rivals and suitors alike, and sets off a series of events that spurs on emotional honesty from all directions. Identities are questioned, secrets are revealed, bonds grow tighter, and most of all, we wonder if what our families want for us is actually what is best for us.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

The Status is Not Quo

The sun was beginning to set after a peaceful day in the Furinkan neighborhood of Nerima Ward. Peaceful days were uncommon in this part of Tokyo, where increasingly-destructive martial arts battles happened with startling regularity. And yet, the past few months had been calm, as for whatever reason, the restless combatants that all decided to call this particular neighborhood home had been strangely quiet. *Something* must have happened to cause this ceasefire, many residents of Furinkan thought to themselves, but many weren't terribly concerned with figuring out what it was, so long as the tranquility continued.

The epicenter of all the aforementioned chaos - Ranma Saotome - was out for an evening stroll. His posture was relaxed, and his hands were at his sides, plunged deep into his pockets. A slight wind gusted here and there, and ruffled his red Chinese-style silk shirt and trademark black pigtail as it blew. Beyond these traits, Ranma seemed to be a typical Japanese teenager, enjoying the waning days of summer, instead of the superpowered disaster-magnet he was. Perhaps most atypically though, was that Ranma was walking on the ground *beside* one of Furinkan's many boundary walls, rather than on top of it as he normally did.

Of all the people enjoying the newfound spate of peace in Nerima, Ranma had potentially enjoyed it the most. As important as keeping one's skills and reflexes sharp were to a martial artist, Ranma figured he didn't have to be training *all* the time, and after a year of near-everyday calamity, he had earned a peaceful, on-terra-firma walk through town. Since *that day* had happened months ago, the majority of the people who made his life difficult had kept their distance. No rivals, no enemies, no love dodecahedron to be entangled in, just calm and quiet. And Ranma fully intended on continuing to enjoy this break in the chaos of his life, until…

"Ranma, prepare to die!!"

An all-too-familiar battlecry echoed through the streets and alleys of Furinkan as Ryoga Hibiki crashed through the concrete wall beside Ranma. The Lost Boy had been searching for his mortal enemy/best friend Ranma Saotome for the better part of two weeks to challenge him to a battle, and after destroying dozens of walls in as many cities all across Japan, his dramatic entrance finally found its intended mark. As concrete sprayed all over the footpath, Ryoga took a commanding stance before Ranma, his heavy umbrella pointed threateningly toward his rival. His expression was a look for sheer determination and battle-harden fury.

Said rival's expression melted from indifference to contempt. "Hey buddy, long time no see. Got somethin' new ya wanna kill me over, or just the usual?" Ranma asked bluntly. Ryoga growled in anger, but before he could reply, Ranma continued, "Look Ryoga, this is the last thing I wanna get inta right now, so if you wouldn't mind-"

Ryoga growled and swung his umbrella into another section of the wall he had broken through, creating another massive hole. “You’ll pay for your insolence today, Ranma! I’ve undergone months of grueling training in the mountains since we last met, and this will finally be-”

“Since we last met? Ya mean when you helped to ruin *my wedding* ?” Ranma cut Ryoga off mid-boast.

Ryoga stood silent after Ranma’s retort, his threatening words getting stuck in his throat. It had been several months since the ill-fated wedding of Ranma Saotome and Akane Tendo, and Ryoga had not been back in Nerima since. He had slinked away from the Tendo dojo after being unintentionally present for the chaos that had ruined the ceremony, and while it was true he had spent much of the time since wandering in the mountains of Japan, little of that time was actually spent training. Whether his journeys had been taken for self-reflection, or to let things cool down in Furinkan, or simply just because he was lost was of no matter now. Ryoga had returned to pick up his rivalry where it had left off, hoping to reclaim some normalcy in his quite-abnormal life, however his rival did not seem to be interested in doing the same.

Ranma’s posture hadn’t changed at all since Ryoga appeared before him. His hands remained in his pockets and his stance remained neutral; if anything his shoulders had slumped even more upon seeing the Lost Boy. His gaze wasn’t even directed at Ryoga, moreso he seemed to be looking *through* him disinterestedly. This wasn’t like Ranma, and instantly Ryoga regretted being there.

After literally crashing the wedding, the guests, invited and uninvited, had seen Ranma get upset in a way no one had ever seen before: a complete and utter defeat followed by a deep, seething anger at everyone involved. Something far more serious than the normal exasperation and frustration Ranma normally exuded. The offending attendees all silently agreed they had taken it too far and had independently decided to leave the poor soul alone for some time. However, Ryoga realized in the current moment, that maybe he hadn’t given Ranma enough time to cool off.

Still, Ryoga was pig-headed even when he wasn’t in his cursed form, and felt the need to defend himself from Ranma’s harsh words. “H-Hey, I didn’t even even plan on coming, my presence was an accident, I swear!” he stammered. “Besides, everyone else there did more damage than I did! And y-you don’t even want to marry Akane away! Why would you still be upset?”

A tense pause that felt like hours passed as gentle breeze rustled the clothing and hair of the two martial artists. Ranma closed his eyes and deeply inhaled as the wind blew over him. He exhaled, and opened his eyes again, still not looking at Ryoga. “You know *damn well* why I’m still upset with you and everyone else Ryoga. *Especially* after everything we went through at Jusendo. Not even you’re that dense, man.”

Ryoga was taken aback. He was used to verbally sparring with Ranma in addition to their actual battles, but this was different. This wasn't the banter between rivals he knew and kind of enjoyed, this was direct and it cut deep. Ryoga took a step back unintentionally, legitimately intimidated by Ranma's barbed words.

"W–well if you wanna settle this issue once and for all, let's do it like we always have, one final batt-"

Ryoga was cut off by someone else this time, as another all-too-familiar cry rang out from down the street.

"*Nihao, Airen!* "

Shampoo chirped as she rammed her bicycle directly into Ryoga's back, running him over as she stopped in front of Ranma. She left the Lost Boy under her bike as she dismounted and scooched up close to her fiance.

"Shampoo finally find you *airen*! It has been so long since Ranma has been to Nekohanten for noodles! Shampoo and Great-Grandmother and even Mousse start to worry!"

Ranma sighed and ran his fingers through his bangs. "For once in my life I'm glad you're here Shampoo. Thanks for taking care a' Ryoga for me," he said, once again not looking directly at the person he was talking with. "Anyway, I was in the middle a' somethin before you two showed up, so I'll be seein' ya." Ranma began to slowly walk away from the other two martial artists.

Shampoo's cheery smile quickly faded into concern. When Ranma wanted to leave a situation, he always did it fast by running or bounding away. He never simply *walked* away, especially this slowly. 'He must still be mad at us, at *me* ," Shampoo thought to herself. She reached out a hand and placed it on Ranma's shoulder as he walked past her. "Ranma, wait please, Shampoo-"

Ranma brushed Shampoo's hand off of his shoulder without turning to face her. "Tell everyone at the Nekohanten to stop worryin' about me. I'm *fine* ." He continued walking.

The ground rumbled as Ryoga came to, and he jumped back to his feet while he simultaneously knocked Shampoo's bicycle off of him. "Ranma! You dare walk away from a challenge?!" Ryoga yelled as he pointed a finger at Ranma.

“Yep, just not in the mood today buddy,” Ranma replied, not turning around.

Looks of shock and worry appeared across Ryoga’s and Shampoo’s faces, respectively. No matter how silly or trivial it may be, Ranma Saotome *never* backed away from a challenge. *Especially* against his closest rival. The two shared a concerned look, and then turned back to Ranma.

“Ranma…” she called out as she reached her arm out to him. “Please tell Shampoo what wrong, Shampoo want to help *airen* !”

“Ranma, d-don’t you dare run away from me! J-just because you’re afraid of a challenge between m-men!” Ryoga stammered out as intently as he could. He wanted to offer emotional support too, but couldn’t bring himself to. Besides, Ranma responds best to challenges and insults, right?

Ranma stopped in his tracks, and turned around to face the two other martial artists. This time, his eyes shot a glare directly at them. “What’s *wrong* is that you two seem ta think everything can go back ta normal! Like if we all pretend nothin’ in the past couple a’ months happened, we can all go back ta how things were between us!” Ranma’s fists were bunched up in front of him now, and despite his commanding tone, Shampoo and Ryoga both noticed them quivering as he spoke. “Well I don’t wanna go back to how things were! If you two wanna help me out, keep leavin’ me alone. I was enjoyin’ the peace and quiet.”

The three stood there for seconds that felt like hours. The wind blew once more, this time more intensely, rusting the loose clothing and hair of the three teenage martial artists. Shampoo broke the silence, taking another step closer to Ranma. “ *Airen* , please stay, Shampoo just want-”

Ranma cut her off. “Forget it, I’m outta here. No one ever listened ta me before, why would they start now?” He turned and leapt onto a nearby rooftop, and bounded away.

Ryoga and Shampoo both watched Ranma as he leapt into the sunset. As he disappeared, Shampoo broke her gaze and looked toward the ground. Ryoga turned to focus on the purple-haired girl in front of him, and noticed her *qipao* now slightly stained by tears. Tepidly, he reached his hand out toward Shampoo’s shoulder, trying to offer a consoling gesture. But emotional support was out of his wheelhouse, and his hand shook with the anxiety of platonically touching a girl.

Without looking, Shampoo grabbed Ryoga’s hand and placed it on her shoulder herself. They both stood in silence as the sun crept lower in the horizon.

Four days had passed, and Shampoo had just put the finishing touches on a piping hot bowl of *chashu* ramen, topped with extra *naruto* . Just the way Ranma liked it. Shampoo had steeled her resolve in the days that had passed since she had dropped in on Ranma and Ryoga's most recent confrontation, and was determined to make it up to him in the most surefire way she knew how: through free food. Plus, didn't people in the West say that the way to a man's heart was through his stomach?

Shampoo placed the ramen bowl in a delivery box and headed for the front door of the Nekohanten. Before she could leave, she was stopped by a voice from behind.

"And just where do you think you're going right before the dinner rush, granddaughter?" Cologne had appeared seemingly from thin air, and stood perched atop her cane in the middle of the Nekohanten dining area.

"Oh, great-grandmother! Shampoo just going out to give ramen to *airen* ! Shampoo sure this will make him feel better!"

Cologne's stern stare softened. "Atta girl Shampoo! What better way to show how much you love your fiance than through a home-cooked meal. Certainly that boy deserves some food made with love after being stuck with that Akane girl and her wretched cooking for so long!" Cologne cackled.

Shampoo cocked her head to the side and smiled. "Thank you great-grandmother. Shampoo be sure to be back soon!"

"Take your time, girl. Winning your beloved's affection is more important than one night at the restaurant. Mousse and I have got it covered tonight, right Mousse?"

"Huh?!?" Mousse stumbled out of the restroom he had been cleaning, brushes and plungers extending from his sleeves. "W-wait Shampoo, you can't leave us here! We have three full parties coming tonight and-"

"Byebyeeeee~" Shampoo sang as she ran out the door.

Mousse's shoulders slumped in defeat. "Ahh, lighten up Mousse, one night of hard work never killed anyone!" Cologne chuckled as Mousse quietly sobbed to himself

Shampoo rode her bicycle through the streets of Nerima at breakneck speeds, skidding around corners and deftly dodging passersby. As she maneuvered through the busy city streets and hopped over obstacles in her path, she steered with one hand and held her delivery box perfectly upright, searching for its contents' intended recipient. Shampoo rounded a corner onto a street lined with numerous storefronts, and finally she found her target: Ranma Saotome, currently in girl form, carrying two paper bags at his side. The fact that he was with Akane at the moment did not deter her. The purple-haired Amazon excitedly heaved her bike into the air while still riding it, and aimed her trajectory squarely at Ranma. " *Nihaooooo* "

Ranma glanced upward and spotted Shampoo barreling toward the pair. "Akane, look out!" he said, pushing the fiance he was walking with out of the way of his other, airborne fiance….which didn't give him enough time to duck out of the way as Shampoo and her bike came crashing down on top of him. After lying on the pavement in pain for a moment, Ranma grumbled and pulled himself out from underneath the deadliest bicycle in Japan. "Shampoo! What the heck are ya doin' now!" Ranma yelled as he jumped to his feet.

"Shampoo bring apology gift to *airen* : bowl of hot, fresh ramen! Shampoo know it is *airen's* favorite!" Shampoo opened the delivery box and presented the soup to Ranma, complete with chopsticks, and not a single drop of broth spilled.

Ranma stared at the bowl, and then looked back at Shampoo. "Look Shampoo, thanks but no thanks! I told ya I wanna be left alone right now!" The redhead said.

Shampoo wasn't taking no for an answer. "Ranma is upset, Shampoo being dutiful fiance and making *airen* feel better! And beside, you is *not* alone right now," the purple-haired warrior said matter-of-factly, pretending to not see the huff Akane was now in. "Shampoo can feed Ranma if like, say 'ahhhh'" Shampoo took the chopsticks from the bowl and grabbed a length of noodles with them, and then reached her hand toward Ranma's mouth.

"Shampoo, I mean it! I don't want your food, and I definitely don't wanna be fed!" Ranma turned his head and pushed Shampoo's hand away from his face. Shampoo countered by deftly moving her hand closer to Ranma's mouth, and soon a martial-arts noodle-feeding battle ensued, as Ranma quickly dodged and blocked all of Shampoo's attempts to force ramen into his face. "Seriously Shampoo, cut it out! Whatever trick stuff you put in that ramen, I ain't gonna fall for it this time!"

Shampoo scowled at Ranma's accusation. "This ramen no trick! This ramen made with love, and Ranma *will* eat!" She lunged her hand forward, chopsticks pointed directly at Ranma's face, the noodles gripped within them now cold from their sparring. Ranma dropped his bags quickly caught the chopsticks between his hands, but the momentum from her attack caused the both of them to lose their balance, causing Shampoo to fall on top of Ranma, and the hot ramen broth to spill all

over Ranma and the items he had been carrying.

"Ranma!" Akane said, stepping closer to help her fiance up. Ranma, however, was too incensed to notice.

"Argh! For once in yer life Shampoo, can ya please just *stop!* " the now black-haired boy exclaimed. He wrested himself free from underneath Shampoo and stood above her. "Why can't ya just *listen* ta me for once!"

"Shampoo just try to make *airen* happy! Why you hurt Shampoo with mean words?! Why you no want Shampoo's love?!" Shampoo replied, her voice beginning to quiver as she kept seated on the ground.

"Because *I. DON'T. LOVE. YOU!* " Silence befell the street they were on, as the crowd of onlookers had all stopped in their tracks to witness the unrequited lovers' quarrel in front of them.

Shampoo clutched her hands to her chest as tears welled in her eyes. She kept looking Ranma in the eyes for a moment, before turning to look at Akane. The short-haired girl had moved up beside Ranma, and placed a hand on his shoulder. Shampoo had expected her rival-in-love to smirk or to chide her in some way, seeing as she had lost this battle of the hearts. But instead she saw Akane looking to Ranma with concern, and then to Shampoo herself with an expression not of boastfulness or pettiness, but of empathy. Akane seemed….genuinely sorry for her?

Ranma's expression immediately softened, and he reached his palm out to the Amazon in front of him. "H-hey Shampoo, I….I'm sorry, I didn't mean-"

"No, Ranma mean what he say. He make it very clear to Shampoo how he feel." Shampoo said softly. "Shampoo leave Ranma alone with Akane now." She gathered the ramen bowl and chopsticks and placed them gingerly back in their delivery box, then she silently got back on her bicycle and rode off.

"Shampoo…" Ranma said quietly as she left. He stood for a moment, before feeling the stares of dozens of bystanders still locked upon him. He was covered in noodles and dripping wet with broth, and he finally took notice of the fish cakes stuck to his face. "Ugh, of course this is how today ends." Ranma sighed.

"Umm, Ranma, your bag," Akane pointed to the ground where Ranma had dropped his shopping

bags. He glanced down, and noticed something poking out from one of them. Something *very private* he would rather not have a staring crowd see. Ranma's face turned a shade of red that matched his silk shirt, and he grabbed his soggy bags from the ground with the speed only a master of the Chestnut Fist could muster.

"Whaddaya all lookin' at?! Nothing ya haven't seen before! Keep movin', keep movin'!"

It had been dark for several hours by the time Cologne finally flipped the sign on the door of the Nekohanten to "closed." The restaurant had served a junior baseball team, a tour bus full of senior citizens, and an entire team of salarymen during their dinner rush, in addition to their usual crowds. And they had been down their best server.

Mousse, who had been waiting tables, bussing, and running orders, in addition to many of his usual back-of-house duties, heaved the last load of dishes into the sink before collapsing from exhaustion. Several throwing knives and bolas clattered onto the linoleum tile as he groaned in pain. "G…granny, I think I need to sleep here tonight, I can't move my legs anymore…" Mousse grumbled.

Cologne shuffled into the kitchen and observed the pitiful pile of a teenage boy lying on her kitchen floor, and shook her head. "Oh Mousse," she tutted. "Youth truly is wasted on the young." The diminutive Amazon jabbed her staff into a pressure point on the right side of Mousse's lower back.

"Yeowch! That hurt you old mummy!" Mousse shouted as he leapt to his feet. To his astonishment, aside from the sharp pain where Cologne had prodded him, his aches and soreness were gone.

"There, that'll take away your pain long enough for you to get up the stairs to your room. Now get a move on Mu Mu, if you aren't going to finish closing with me I need you to be out of my way. Go one, that pressure point only lasts for so long!" Cologne said, shooing Mousse out of the kitchen with her staff. The long-haired boy grumbled as he trundled out of the kitchen. "And don't think I can't hear what you're saying under your breath young man, even at my age my senses are twice as sharp as you think yours are!" Mousse was silent the rest of his way out of the restaurant.

"Speaking of senses," Cologne said to herself after her disgruntled employee had left, "It sounds like Shampoo has stopped crying." Cologne sighed as she shook her head. She had sensed her great-granddaughter enter the building hours ago, but had decided to give her some space to be by herself. "Poor girl, she sounded so upset. Well, better take care of this mess so I can check on her."

Cologne hopped onto her cane and quickly cleaned and dried all the dishes in the sink in seconds using the *Kachu Tenshin Amaguriken* . With lightning speed, she jumped around the Nekohanten, wiping down every surface and sweeping the floors. Within minutes, the disaster area of a restaurant she observed was spotless. Cologne chuckled to herself. “Makes me wonder why I even keep that part-timer around.”

Cologne gathered all the trash in the restaurant into an enormous bag that she flung over her shoulder, and hit the lights as she opened the back door. She hurled the garbage into the receptacle in the alley and leapt up to the second floor to her great-grandaughter’s bedroom window. Cologne peered in and saw Shampoo curled up on her bed, turned away from the window, no longer crying but still sniffling here and there. She tapped on the window with her cane as she perched on the windowsill. “Mind if I come in?”

Without moving, Shampoo lightly muttered “No, great-grandmother.”

Cologne opened the window and hopped onto the floor of Shampoo’s bedroom. Though the Amazons had been living in Furinkan for nearly a year, Shampoo’s room still looked as if she had just moved in. Which, considering how they hadn’t planned on staying any longer than what was needed to win over Ranma, made total sense. Beyond her bed and vanity, there was no other furniture, nor were there any decorations on the walls. At least, there was nothing hanging on the wall anymore. Cologne noticed the corkboard that once had been hanging by Shampoo’s closet had been flung into the corner of the room, and was lying face-down on the floor.

“I take it that smoothing things out with the groom didn’t go as planned?” Cologne asked as she walked closer to her great-granddaughter.

Shampoo slowly shook her head. “Ranma still mad at Shampoo. Ranma say…say he….not love Shampoo.” She struggled to finish her sentence, stifling back tears as she repeated what her fiance had said to her hours earlier.

Cologne placed her withered hand onto Shampoo’s shoulder. “I’m sorry Shampoo. You keep pouring your heart and soul into that boy and he just can’t seem to recognize how grateful he should be. To have such a wonderful girl so completely dedicated to him, it’s astonishing how stubborn he is.” Cologne hopped up onto Shampoo’s bed and sat beside her great-granddaughter.

Shampoo turned to face her grandmother. Her face was red and still wet with tears. “Great-grandmother, is…..is Shampoo doing something wrong?” she asked. “Ranma still not want to be with Shampoo after almost one year. Shampoo has done so many thing to make him love her, but he still don’t. Is Shampoo bad person for trying so hard to make Ranma love her? When it obvious

he not feel the same?"

Cologne sighed and smiled slightly at her great-granddaughter. "Shampoo, you aren't a bad person at all. You're trying to show your beloved how much you care about him, and the fact that he can't see that is all on him. Any other man in the world would be completely smitten with you Shampoo. You're beautiful, strong, and you're a great cook! A perfect catch!" Cologne exclaimed, doing her best to exalt the purple-haired girl next to her. "Maybe spending so much time as a girl scrambled his brain…"

"Great-grandmother, don't say that!" Shampoo quickly sat up in response to Cologne's musing. "Shampoo sure that not reason." She sat quietly for a moment, before mustering up the nerve to say, "Maybe…maybe love just not work in way we hoped it would…" Shampoo trailed off, and glanced over at the corkboard she had thrown onto the floor.

Cologne saw where she was looking and hopped over to where the board was. She picked it up and flipped it over. It was a collage of pictures of Shampoo and Ranma. Some of the pictures were just of the two of them, and others larger group photos. The majority of them, however, were pictures taken of herself, with Ranma caught off-guard somewhere in the frame. Cologne looked over the collage for a moment, before saying, "So, you get rejected and it's all over? All of this," she held the collage toward Shampoo and gestured to the pictures it was made of, "means nothing now?"

Shampoo's lip quivered and she clutched her bedsheets in her hands. "It…it not mean nothing. It's just…" Shampoo took a moment to gather her thoughts, and then took a deep breath. "Maybe, Ranma will never love Shampoo like she loved him. Like Shampoo never love Mousse in same way he love her. Maybe… maybe it just never work out, and Shampoo should stop trying." Shampoo's mind went back to earlier that day, and particularly back to how Akane had looked at both her and Ranma after she had made fools of the two of them. "Maybe, Ranma end up with someone else. And… maybe that okay."

Cologne expected her great-granddaughter to break down into tears after hearing that absurd statement come out of her mouth. That she obviously only had said these words out of despair and heartbreak. But as Cologne stared at Shampoo, her emotions remained stable, and she almost seemed…relieved?

Shampoo, who had broken eye contact with Cologne out of anxiety, looked back at her great-grandmother with renewed resolve after her confession. The tension in the silence between the two was powerful, but neither Amazon backed down.

Finally, Cologne closed her eyes and shook her head. "Shampoo, you and Ranma are engaged to be married. He beat you in combat and by sacred Amazon law, you two are to be wed. Nothing can or will change that. It is our custom, and you will not break thousands of years of tradition by calling

it off."

"But…but great-grandmother, we already not follow Amazon law! Shampoo give Kiss of Death to Ranma and Akane, and you no make her try to kill them anymore!" Shampoo retorted.

"Shampoo! You dare talk back to your elder! Shame on you!" Cologne rose her voice to her great-granddaughter, taken aback by her sudden lack of respect. "The Tendo girl isn't a real threat, and son-in-law was a man the whole time, so neither Kiss of Death is valid. Once the Kiss of Marriage is performed, it is a permanent bond between two souls. No Amazon can take it back, lest she fear dishonor and expulsion from the tribe!" Cologne took a deep breath, and let her composure return to her. "You're upset, so I will let you off this time, but I want to make sure we're clear: no granddaughter of mine will shirk her responsibilities to her family and her culture. No matter how hard it is, you have to make Ranma clear to your true feelings, and his understanding will follow. It *must* follow. Do you understand, Shampoo?"

After a long pause, Shampoo nodded. "Yes great-grandmother, Shampoo understand what she must do."

"Good. Now, get some rest girl. You've had a long day, and a good night's sleep will help to clear your head. Besides, we need our star waitress in the cafe tomorrow. Sweet dreams, Shampoo." Cologne grabbed her staff and left her great-granddaughter alone in her bedroom.

Shampoo glanced over at the photo collage Cologne had left at the foot of her bed, and planned her next move.

Under the light of the moon, Shampoo lept from rooftop to rooftop. She had done her best to suppress her aura as she left her residency above the Nekohanten, hoping her great-grandmother wouldn't sense that she had left. She had agonized over whether or not tonight was the right time to do this, especially so soon after her confrontations with both Ranma and Cologne, but for her own sake she needed to do this as quickly as possible.

Shampoo made her way as quickly as she could to the Tendo Dojo. Through a little cat-form reconnaissance, she knew that Ranma had been staying there more often again, and hoped he would be there tonight. After a short rooftop jaunt, she reached her destination. She leapt over the boundary wall of the property, and silently bounded to the second floor and slipped in through a hallway window. Just like old times.

Shampoo snuck through the hallway of the Tendo residence and stopped at Ranma's door. She

hesitated for a moment, wondering one last time if this was the right thing to do, but she persisted and opened the sliding door just wide enough for her to slip in. Inside Ranma's bedroom she found….no one. No Ranma, no Genma, not even Happosai, thank goodness.

Shampoo sighed and frowned. 'Maybe this was a bad idea after all,' she thought to herself. She was about to leave, but she then noticed the closet door was slightly open. Shampoo spied a few of Ranma's Chinese silk shirts hanging up, as well as the two shopping bags he had been carrying earlier on the floor of the closet. 'He *must* be here somewhere, but where?'

As she pondered why Ranma's things would be here without him, she glanced again at the two bags on the floor. Only now did she find it odd that they were completely nondescript, brown paper bags. Most stores really liked to show off their logos on their bags, didn't they? What could have he bought that he was trying to hide? Shampoo's curiosity got the better of her as she tiptoed closer to Ranma's closet. 'Maybe one peek wouldn't hurt, who would know?'

As she creeped through the dark bedroom, Shampoo was startled by the noise of the sliding door to the bedroom opening behind her. She had to cover her mouth with her hands to stop herself from gasping.

"Shampoo! What the hell are you doing here?!?" Shampoo turned around to see Ranma, in his usual sleeping attire of yellow boxers and a tank top, standing in the doorway to his own bedroom, but entering from the hallway. "What's wrong with you! Get outta my room!" he shout-whispered to her.

"R…Ranma! Shampoo is sorry! Can we please talk, just for moment?"

Ranma glared long and hard at Shampoo before he gave a most dramatic sigh. "Alright, fine. But can we take it outside before we wake the whole house up?"

Ranma and Shampoo stood in the backyard of the Tendo household, closer to the koi pond than anyone with a Jusenkyo curse probably should have. Ranma stood with his arms crossed, while Shampoo clutched her hands nervously together in front of her chest.

"Well, I'm waitin' Shampoo. What's so important ta talk about that it couldn't wait?"

Shampoo looked away from the disgruntled boy, trying to muster the words she wanted to say.

This conversation had been so much easier when she was rehearsing it in her head on her way over. But now, with Ranma standing in front of her, and still angry with her…

"C'mon, out with it! I ain't got all night!"

"Ranma! Please, Shampoo……no, *I* understand you're not happy with me. But I want to make it up to you, from earlier today, and from all the other times too." Shampoo said.

Ranma had gone from frustrated to bewildered in no time flat. Did Shampoo…just*not* talk in the third person? And with proper grammar? "S…Shampoo, did you just…"

"Hold on Ranma, I want to say what I have to say, and then I can answer questions," Shampoo looked at Ranma, who was visibly in a state of surprise, and took advantage of his sudden silence to finish her statement. "I want to say, I am sorry. For everything I and my great-grandmother put you through this year. I understand you are not in love with me, and that is okay. I promise I am done trying to force you into loving me."

Ranma was in full information overload. His entire relationship with Shampoo had suddenly changed with a single paragraph from her. Hell, everything he knew about her might have just gone out the window too, now that she suddenly could speak fluent Japanese. After realizing he had been staring at her in shock for far too long, he shook himself from his stupor and replied. "Do ya really mean it Shampoo? This isn't just some game ta get me ta come running back to you?"

Shampoo shook her head intently. "No, I really mean it. Because I have realized something else today too."

"W…what's that, Shampoo?

Shampoo turned her head away from Ranma, and paused for a long moment. Finally, she turned back to face him. There were tears in her eyes, but they weren't tears of sadness. Instead, she smiled the most genuine smile Ranma had seen from her in a long time. "I'm not in love with you either, Ranma!"

Ice Cream Social

Chapter Summary

After dropping a bombshell on Ranma, Shampoo explains herself to her friends. And in the process, everyone learns some new things about each other. All of this is a good excuse to get some ice cream.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ranma Saotome was someone who was very rarely at a loss for words. Whether it was a boast during battle, a sarcastic quip, or an observation that really should have been kept to himself, Ranma always had something to say. In fact, many who knew him would say he should keep quiet more. But here at this moment, his mouth wasn't working.

Within the course of a few minutes, his entire understanding of someone who he thought he knew very well had been totally upended. Shampoo, one of his numerous suitors, who just this afternoon had tried to force feed ramen in public as a show of affection, had just told him that she actually *wasn't* in love with him. Not only that, suddenly she seemed to have a much better grasp on the Japanese language than she had let on in the past year or so that he had known her. And she seemed to be happy about giving up on chasing him? The thing she was so dedicated to that she had moved to a new country to do it?

Of course he was speechless.

Shampoo wiped the cathartic tears from her eyes and looked at Ranma. Ranma seemed to be in shock, motionless, stuck in that exaggerated pose he seemed to always do when something unexpected happened. She gave him a moment to process all the information she had dropped on him, but as the long pause kept growing longer, she noticed Ranma trying to say something, but failing to do so as he just kept stammering instead.

"Sh…sh…..sh….sh…."

"A…A…are y…..y….you"

Shampoo giggled to herself at Ranma's continued overreaction. She knew what he was trying to say even though he couldn't make the words happen. "Yes Ranma, I am serious about what I just

said. I promise, you have my word as a fellow warrior."

"Bu….but….what about….." Ranma's mouth was beginning to function again, but where to start? He had so many questions. "But what about……all a'.....all a' everything this past year?!?" he asked, making large circular gestures with his arms. "Not even 8 hours ago you were still tryin' ta win me over, what made all a' that change so suddenly?!"

Shampoo took a deep breath and sighed, and smiled at the perplexed boy in front of her. "I have been doing much thinking since your…..since, that day, since I and everyone else had seen you last," Shampoo said, looking to the ground briefly as she indirectly brought up the wedding. "And I have realized that what I did that day, what I did to you and Akane, was wrong. You two have feelings for each other, and nothing I could do would change that. And…and if I kept trying to get between you and her, it would only hurt you more."

"I mean, me an'…me an' Akane, we…" Ranma stammered, falling back into old habits before catching himself and quickly changing the subject. "That part I get, an' I really….uh, really appreciate you….sayin' yer sorry…" Ranma said, placing his hand on the back of his neck shyly. Gratitude was also something Ranma historically struggled with, but he managed to choke out an emotionally honest sentence; though he still looked away as he said it.

After a moment, he snapped back to reality. "But, all the *airen* an' *wo ai ni* stuff, the chasin' me around and schemin' ta get me ta fall in love with ya, was all a' that fake the whole time? Didja….not actually love me?"

Shampoo's smile faded slightly as she turned her head away from Ranma. "I…I was in love, Ranma, but I do not know if it was with you or with the *idea* of you." She paused to gather her thoughts, and looked back to Ranma, who still looked puzzled. "That…might have come out badly. I mean, I had feelings for you, and think I still do, but I do not know if they are truly love. At least, not in the way you and Akane love each other."

Ranma turned bright red, and became flustered all over again. But before he could blurt out any response, a window slammed open on the second floor of the Tendo dojo.

"Ranma! Who are you talking to so late at night?! Is that….Shampoo?!?" Akane yelled from her bedroom window. True to old habits, a rage started to bubble inside of her, seeing Shampoo and Ranma together so soon after the incident that prior afternoon. But, it quelled as she noticed something was different about this interaction. Ranma and Shampoo were standing a respectful distance apart and seemingly just talking, with no affection or embracing or anything of the sort being done by either party. Just two people having a conversation. For those two, it was very strange indeed.

“A….Akane! I promise it ain’t what it looks like! Me an’ Shampoo were just…” Ranma stuttered out, loudly enough to wake whatever neighbors and housemates that weren’t already awake from Ranma’s previous loud stammering.

Akane’s expression melted into a kind smile. “It *looks* like you two were talking like adults for once, so I hope that this is what it looks like.”

Shampoo turned to face Akane and returned her smile in kind. “Yes, Shampoo just come to Ranma to apologize for earlier. Shampoo is sorry it so late; Shampoo wanted to not wait.”

“Shampoo, why are ya-” Ranma tried to ask, noticing Shampoo had returned to speaking in the third person after making it very clear she could do otherwise. But he was cut off by Shampoo once more.

“Shampoo want to keep talking but she know it late. Can Shampoo meet with you later?” She said to Ranma, before turning back to face the window Akane was leaving from. “With both of you? Shampoo have….lots to say.”

Ranma quickly turned to Akane as well, and shrugged slightly, as if to silently ask his fiance if this was a good idea.

Akane looked to Ranma for a moment, before turning back to Shampoo. “I think that would be very nice, Shampoo,” she said with a smile. “How about we chat over some ice cream tomorrow?”

Ranma tried, but failed, to suppress a small but excited gasp.

Shampoo cocked her head to the side and smiled back at the girl in the window. “That sound like good idea! Shampoo leave you alone now, and be seing you tomorrow!!!” Shampoo bowed slightly to both Ranma and Akane and then ran to the dojo’s boundary wall. She leapt over it and ran off into the night.

After watching Shampoo leave, Ranma turned back to face Akane. “Uhh, lemme get ya caught up real quick,” he said, shyly rubbing the back of his head.

‘Aiya, why am I so anxious!’ Shampoo thought to herself as she waited for Ranma and Akane.

She had realized when she returned home the night before that she had left the Tendo Dojo in such a hurry that she had forgotten to set a time and place for the threes' ice cream social. Luckily, she knew someone that would do pretty much any favor she asked, and he could even fly to boot. So, after having Mousse deliver a message to the dojo, and receiving a reply, they had solidified their plan for the afternoon.

Shampoo had gotten to the cafe half an hour early to make sure she wasn't late, and had been nervously waiting outside for the other two to arrive. She passed the time as best as she could, observing the pedestrians walk by as they entered and exited the other businesses on the street. She watched a flock of birds sitting on a power line on the other side of the street, and giggled as they later squabbled over some french fries a little boy dropped on the sidewalk. Aside from having to very firmly turn down the advances of a few boys who walked past her, it was a very pleasant afternoon. Everything was so…peaceful; a feeling she was decidedly not used to after a year of martial arts mayhem.

And yet, she couldn't shake the feeling of anxiety she had deep down inside her. Shampoo rarely ever felt anxious about anything, not on her busiest nights at the Nekohanten or even in the heat of battle. She was a trained and hardened warrior who feared nothing. So why, she wondered, was she so nervous to have a conversation with her friends?

'At least, I hope they are my friends..' Shampoo thought to herself after pondering her worries. Only now had it dawned on Shampoo that she hadn't actually had many cordial conversations with Ranma over the past year, and she wasn't sure if she'd had a real talk with Akane *ever* . She smoothed out her *qipao* out for at least the sixth time since she had gotten to the cafe, trying to take her mind off of all the bad outcomes that might happen that afternoon. As she looked up from fixing her already-immaculate appearance, Shampoo noticed two familiar figures walking toward her.

"Well, I still think it was kind of Mousse to deliver Shampoo's message to us. And he even brought a letter opener with him!"

"Kind?! He tried ta *stab me* with it! Three times! You an' I got different definitions a' kind."

Shampoo shouted an excited ' *Nihao!'* toward the pair as she waved her arms widely to greet them. She took note of the outfits each of them were wearing: Akane was dressed impeccably as always, wearing a sundress paired with a floppy summer hat. And as usual when he went out for ice cream, Ranma was in his girl form, but unusually he wasn't wearing any of his trademark silk shirts. Instead, Ranma wore a t-shirt matched to a pair of overalls with the word 'China' embroidered onto the bib. Shampoo was a little surprised to see Ranma wearing girls' clothing when it wasn't a part of some scheme he had concocted, but she had to admit the outfit suited the redhead perfectly.

“Hey Shampoo!” Ranma called out as the two crossed the street to meet the purple-haired girl.

“It is very nice to see both of you!” Shampoo exclaimed as they all convened in front of the cafe. “You both look….very nice today!”

Akane smiled at the compliment. Ranma turned bright red and shyly down toward everyone’s shoes. “Thank you Shampoo, you do too!” Akane said. “And Ranma’s outfit came out of my closet, so she should thank me too! Isn’t that right?” Akane playfulled elbowed Ranma’s shoulder, and Ranma shot back a slight smirk from her still blushing face.

‘Her…’ Shampoo thought, before being ushered into the cafe by her two companions. The three went up to the counter and placed their orders. Shampoo, growing up in a remote mountain village, wasn’t very familiar with ice cream, so Ranma helped her navigate the menu.

“So everythin’ here is real good, but the more complicated stuff might be kinda overwhelmin’ if ya ain’t used to sweets, so maybe one a’ the simpler ones might be better for ya to start off with….”

The fact that this was the very same cafe that Shampoo had destroyed the wall of while tracking down Ranma last autumn was completely lost on the three girls at the counter. The owner of the shop glared unhappily as they poured over the menu, but he, fearing even more property damage, kept his mouth shut. The trio settled on their orders - Shampoo and Akane ordering parfaits, and Ranma ordering what must have been the largest sundae they offered - and all sat down at a booth in the back corner of the cafe.

“So, you’re saying that you *don’t* love Ranma anymore?” Akane asked, after Shampoo had given the recap of what she had told Ranma last night.

“Yes, that is what Shamp…..what *I* think,” Shampoo replied, now feeling comfortable dropping her third-person speech in front of Akane too. “I do not wish to chase you anymore, Ranma. I know I have caused much trouble, and do not wish to be a bother anymore.”

Akane ate a spoonful of her parfait. “So what brought this on? Even yesterday afternoon you still seemed so determined to win Ranma over,” she said, gesturing with her spoon.

Shampoo pushed a piece of fruit in her parfait around with her spoon. “I have been thinking a lot in the past months, and have been wondering why I was spending so much time trying to make a

thing happen that very clearly was not going to happen. It made me realize that *ai* …that Ranma will not ever love me, and that it would be best for everyone if I stopped trying so hard to change that." Shampoo turned her gaze toward her desert, and even though she smiled, her eyes betrayed a twinge of sadness. "And I want to stop being annoying to everyone I know. Yesterday only made me sure of that feeling."

Ranma stopped wolfing down her ice cream, and she and Akane looked toward Shampoo. A moment of silence hung in the air, until it was broken by Ranma. "Shampoo…." she said softly.

Shampoo snapped her head back up to meet the empathetic eyes of the two girls across the table from her, and then sheepishly smiled. "Oh, you do not have to feel sorry for me! I know I have been most frustrating to be around since I moved here!" she said, waving her hands back and forth to dismiss the others' concern. "And that is why I wanted to talk with you both. I want to apologize and not want to be a bother anymore."

Another pause followed, and Shampoo began to worry about all of the rightly-deserved mean things Ranma and Akane might say to her. She'd made their lives so much more difficult since she showed up, how could they ever forgive her?

Ranma and Akane looked at each other, and, unseen to Shampoo, squeezed each other's hands underneath the table. They both looked back at the catastrophizing girl across the table and smiled kindly. "We really appreciate you being so honest with us Shampoo. And I think we can all agree to let bygones be bygones, right?" Akane replied.

"Yeah, apology accepted!" Ranma exclaimed. "It'll be nice ta have one less fiance and once more friend around here!"

"F…friend?" Shampoo gasped quietly, as tears welled up in her eyes.

"I…I mean, if ya still wanna be friends. I totally understand if ya need space or don't wanna see us no more after everything and-" Ranma started to nervously ramble, fearing she'd said something wrong, before Shampoo cut her off.

"No, no! It's nothing like that. I am just….very happy you both still want to be my friend," Shampoo said, wiping her tears and happily smiling. Ranma returned her smile with a big goofy grin.

“Well, I’ve still got some questions Shampoo,” Akane said. “If you aren’t in love with Ranma, then why did you put all that time and energy into all the schemes and tricks into wooing her over the past year?”

Shampoo sighed to herself. “I think I do still have some feelings for you, Ranma, but I do not think they are true love. I think I may have been in love with the *idea* of you.”

“Well, what does that mean exactly?” Ranma asked, doing her best to avoid a bruised ego.

“Oh! Let me try to explain: in Joketsuzoku culture, giving the Kiss of Marriage is a very exciting ritual. It is so rare that any man can defeat an Amazon warrior in combat, but it is not shameful to lose a battle this way. Instead, it is a very high honor to be able to give the Kiss of Marriage to opponent, as it means you will have a very strong husband, and will raise very strong children. So, when Ranma defeated me the second time, I became very excited, because…well…” Shampoo nervously trailed off, and all three girls at the table started to blush.

“W…well, I thought I was in love with Ranma because I had to give the Kiss of Marriage. But, now that I have actually been thinking about my feelings, I realized that I was actually more in love with the idea of being so highly honored by my village. That, I could truly live up to Great-Grandmother’s legacy,” Shampoo continued.

“Well, I’m sure that woulda never been a problem anyway!” Ranma chimed in. “Yer a great martial artist Shampoo, and you were already the strongest yer village, right?”

“Thank you Ranma, but it is not as simple as that,” Shampoo replied. “Because I am an only child, Great-Grandmother has high expectations for me to carry on the family. And ever since I….failed to kill you, she has been extra strict with me. It is the reason why she came back to Japan with me - she wanted to *personally* make sure I do not fail at Kiss of Marriage too.” Shampoo sighed, and stirred her softening ice cream in its dish with her spoon. “Great-Grandmother is big reason why I have been pulling so many schemes in the past year, and is also the reason why…..I pretended to not know Japanese. She says foreign men like a woman who plays dumb…”

Ranma and Akane had completely forgotten to bring up the subject of Shampoo’s sudden improvement in language fluency. Shampoo still stumbled over some words and phrased some things oddly, but her Japanese was actually quite good; much better than the simplistic way she had spoken up until yesterday. And, now that they thought of it, it had been strange that Shampoo did not seem to improve at speaking Japanese the entire time they had known her.

“Shampoo, that’s not fair to have to pretend to be that way,” Akane said, with Ranma nodding in

agreement. “I’m sorry you felt pressured into thinking you had to belittle yourself for someone else.”

“Thank you, Akane, you are a good friend,” Shampoo replied, Akane’s kind words cheering her up slightly. “I did not take my true feelings into account during this whole past year, and I did not take yours into account either, Ranma. And yours either, Akane! And that is not fair for any of us. So, I am standing up for myself now! And because of that, I do not want to marry you any more Ranma. Not that you are not a wonderful person, because you are! But I would be much more happy to be your friend!”

Ranma smirked. “Heh, I know I’m wonderful, ‘s why I got so many people in love with me!” she playfully boasted, before being kicked under the table by Akane. Ranma yelped, and Shampoo giggled.

“So, what does that all mean for you, Shampoo?” Akane asked as Ranma rubbed her shin in pain. “Isn’t it Amazon law for you to marry Ranma since you gave her that kiss? What happens if you don’t go through with that?”

Shampoo’s smile faded slightly. “You are right. The Kiss of Marriage is a pact an Amazon makes with another person. No one in my village has ever chosen to not go through with marriage after giving the Kiss. She is to hunt betrothed down to ends of the Earth until they are wed, no matter how long it takes,” Shampoo said, before pausing for a moment. “I remember great-grandmother telling me that it took Mousse’s mother many years to track down his father and bring him back to the village after she gave him the Kiss of Marriage.”

“Wait a minute, you mean duck-boy’s pop is some kinda martial arts whiz too?” Ranma exclaimed incredulously.

“Yes, he is who taught Mousse how to fight with hidden weapons,” Shampoo said. “Mousse’s mother always say his tricks were the only way he was able to defeat her.”

“Well, obviously Mousse ain’t nearly at the level his pop musta been at,” Ranma retorted.

“Anyway,” Akane interjected, “if you decide to call off the Kiss of Marriage with Ranma, what will happen then?”

“I….am not sure. It has never been done before. I can only imagine,” Shampoo said, “that I will be

exiled from Joketsuzoku if I do not fulfill my duty. Or, maybe even worse…" she trailed off, remembering how Cologne described the harsh punishment she received after failing to kill Ranma as 'getting off easy.'

"Do…do ya really think that'll be what happens?" Ranma asked, concerned.

"Again, I do not know. But my people take their customs very seriously, and I cannot imagine my punishment would be minor. Though…" Shampoo trailed off as she thought for a moment, "I suppose I was not made to carry out either Kiss of Death I gave to both of you."

"So maybe the rules aren't as set in stone as we may think?" Akane asked.

"I am not sure, but I must be very careful until I can be certain," Shampoo said. She fiddled around with her spoon, spinning it around in her ice cream dish as its melting contents. "Until then, can I ask a favor of you both?"

"Yeah, sure Shampoo, whatcha need?" Ranma replied.

"Can……we all pretend everything is like it was before? At least when we are around other people?" Shampoo asked with sadness in her voice. "I do not want to keep acting the way I was, but I also do not want anyone to become suspicious. Especially not Great-Grandmother…" She shuddered at the thought of Cologne's disapproval, and the retribution that would follow had she found out her great-granddaughter had cast off her sacred duty. "At least until I can be more certain of what will happen if I call everything off."

Ranma clinked her spoon into her empty bowl. Only now did the other two girls at the table notice she had been sneaking bites of her ice cream using the *Kachu Tenshin Amaguriken* while they were all talking. She swallowed the last bite of her ice cream, and smirked. "I think we can manage that, right Akane? I'm *excellent* at deceiving people," she said, pointing her thumb at her chest.

"If you're such a master manipulator," Akane said sarcastically, "then why is it that I can always see through all of your ruses so easily?"

"Hey! I'm a great actress! If I tried I could fool the pants off ya!" Ranma retorted. Shampoo noticed this argument between Ranma and Akane seemed much less intense than the ones she was used to witnessing. Like it was more of a verbal spar than an actual fight, and their bickering almost felt playful in a way. And it was over much more quickly and less violently than their usual

arguing. ‘It is about time they stopped being at each other's throats,’ she thought to herself with a slight smile.

“But I’m serious, you two. Do you really think we can fool Cologne? I know we’ve kept a lot of charades up for a long time, but she’s an incredibly wise martial arts master. This might be out of our league,” Akane said before eating another spoonful of her parfait.

“I do not know, Great-Grandmother is very perceptive. It may be best if we do not see each other much for now,” Shampoo said, with sadness in her voice. “But also it would be suspicious if I stay away completely. We must think of a balance.”

“I’m sure we can do this, guys! All we gotta do is just keep doing what we always do! I’ll come over ta the *Nekohanten* fer some noodles every once in a while, you throw a couple’a *airens* and *wo ai ni’s* at me while I’m there, and then you and Akane can pretend ta spar over me every once in a while, and it’ll be like nothin’ ever changed!” Ranma said with a reassuring grin. “And then you can tell the old ghoul yer off pulling some scheme or whatnot ta win me over when you leave the restaurant, and that way we can all hang out an’ be pals in secret!”

Shampoo brightened up at the thought of secret hangouts with Ranma and Akane.

“Well, I’m still not sure about this whole situation, but if you two think you can keep up appearances, then I suppose I’m in too,” Akane said.

“A’course we can! And even if we can’t, what’s the worst that’ll happen?” Ranma asked confidently. Akane shot her a sour look and they both looked to Shampoo, who grimaced at Ranma’s rhetorical question. “Oh, right, uhhh…..my bad.”

They all sat in awkward silence, until Shampoo asked a question of her own. “Ranma, can I ask you a question now?”

“Yeah Shampoo, shoot!”

“Um, well, I have noticed today that you seem to be much more….comfortable being a girl than you usually are. And that you have…..” Shampoo paused, uncertain of how to phrase her question. “That you….” She had picked up well enough on the clues, between Ranma’s outfit and differences in language she and Akane had been using. She felt she knew the answer, but she needed to ask to be sure; today was all about honesty and clarity of communication. “Ranma, are

you….okay with being a girl now?"

Ranma blinked twice, before blushing slightly. "Ehh, I guess it is kinda obvious, isn't it?" she said, rubbing the back of her head.

"And it's probably the least surprising news in the world," Akane chimed in with a sly smile.

"Hey! Shampoo asked me, not you!" Ranma chided.

Akane was right though, now that Shampoo thought about it, it wasn't terribly surprising news. The longer Shampoo had known Ranma, the more comfortable she seemed to be with her girl form. True, her boy mode seemed to be her default, but Ranma did seem to spend more and more time as a girl, and was less eager to change back at times. And regardless of the reason, it took very little coaxing to get her into girl's clothes as of late; and those outfits of hers were very well put together.

"But, uhh, yeah! It all clicked fer me when we were all at Jusenkyo a couple'a months ago. And at the wedding, when the Guide sent us that barrel a' *Nannichuan* water," Ranma said, rubbing her arm shyly as she talked, "I didn't want it. When the old perv drank it, I was more peeved that none a' the other idiots I know who're cursed couldn't use it." Ranma paused, and looked out the window at the front of the cafe. "My girl side's a part a' me, and I'm okay with that. I….honestly like it sometimes."

Shampoo blushed slightly. This news was *not* making her decision to give up on Ranma any easier to deal with. Shampoo noticed she was staring at the redhead's face only when Ranma stopped staring into the distance and made eye contact with her. Shampoo blinked, and then fumbled for another question to ask to distract herself. "Um…..so, does this mean you want to be a girl all of the time?"

"Nah, I don't think so. I still like bein' a guy sometimes too. But other times I'm way more comfortable like this. And sometimes it feels like I'm kinda…neutral on it?" Ranma said, trying to find the right words to express her complex feelings. Gender is real hard, you know? "I dunno, it's real hard ta explain, but it ain't just an automatic thing that happens when I change 'cause a' my curse. And maybe I've always felt this way? I dunno…" she trailed off, pushing her index fingers together meekly. "I been meanin' ta chat with Konatsu about…..this…..but I, uh, ain't exactly been in the mood ta socialize lately."

Shampoo sat quietly and absorbed all the information Ranma had told her. She'd always taken Ranma's….situation….for granted, considering all the bluster she used to put up about being a

manly man who hated turning into a girl all the time. But hearing her admit that she not only felt comfortable with her girl form, but actually enjoyed it sometimes, it all made sense. She had noticed Ranma felt a lot less pent up and on edge today than she typically was. She was still feisty, of course, but not combative; like a weight had been lifted off of her shoulders. Shampoo felt very happy for her friend.

"I know that's a bunch ta dump on ya all at once, but, I mean that's the theme of the afternoon, right?" Ranma joked, trying to break the tension in the air.

Shampoo smiled, and raised her hand up to her mouth as she giggled. "I am very happy for you Ranma! It is very nice to see you so comfortable with yourself. I support you 100%!"

Ranma smiled the most genuine smile Shampoo had ever seen. "Oh, could ya also help me out and not let my folks know about all this? I, uhh, don't exactly know how ta break this news ta them either," Ranma asked Shampoo. Coming out to your parents was already difficult enough, let alone with a seppuku contract demanding a rigid adherence to masculinity lingering in the air.

"Of course! I am counting on you both, so you can count on me!" Shampoo exclaimed, before remembering one more question she wanted to ask. "And you are okay with Ranma being like this, Akane?"

Akane smirked. "Who do you think helped her go bra shopping yesterday?"

"Akaaaane!!!!!!" Ranma shouted a little too loudly, blushing a brighter shade of red than her hair. Akane and Shampoo both shared a laugh.

"But yes, I'm also very happy for Ranma and support her in any way she wants to be. We've been a lot…..happier together since she told me about herself," Akane said as returned her right hand under the table to give Ranma's left hand another squeeze. "And besides, this idiot helped me get over myself and admit that I like girls too!"

Ranma shot a sly glance at Akane, still blushing.

Shampoo bit her lip and twiddled her thumbs. "That is….honestly very reassuring for me to hear," she said, growing more quiet. "Because…..I also…..like girls too. And…maybe I do not like boys at all?" She sat silently, looking at her parfait that she had barely touched, before laughing slightly to herself. "I think it is part of why I….chased after you so much Ranma. And it is why I was so

eager to give the Kiss of Death to both of you….it meant I had an excuse to kiss two pretty girls."

Akane and Ranma both sat silently for a moment, and Akane began to blush as well. This confession from Shampoo also made total sense to them now that they thought about it. Shampoo was very eager to be very physically intimate with Ranma even when she was in girl form, and she was positively repulsed by Mousse's advances. The two sat quietly until Ranma burst out laughing uncontrollably. If the attention of the rest of the cafe patrons hadn't already been on them before, it certainly was now.

"Oh man Shampoo, I'm sorry. It's just," Ranma said with a snort of laughter, "It's just, all three a' us get so much male attention, and a' course we all turned out ta be gay as hell!"

The other two girls watched Ranma continue to lose it, before they too joined in with her laughing.

After regaining their composure, the three girls continued to enjoy each others' company and talk about much less serious matters while they finished their ice cream. After sitting in the cafe for much of the afternoon, Ranma, Akane, and Shampoo all noticed how late it was getting, and formulated their plans for the rest of the week. They all waved each other goodbye, and as Shampoo retrieved her bike from the nearby rack, she turned back to look at Ranma and Akane. She noticed they were holding hands on their walk back home. She sighed, and smiled to herself. Shampoo continued to smile on her ride back to the *Nekohanten* , incredibly pleased with how her day had turned out.

However, none of the three had noticed that a certain white waterfowl had joined the flock of birds sitting on the power lines across the street from the cafe. It watched the three girls as they departed, and grumbled to itself as it flew away into the sky above Nerima…

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for getting through the exposition chapter! I promise more plot will follow in upcoming chapters, but lots of things needed to be said by all three of our friends to set the stage for everything to come. Also as a note, I'm using the "controversial" fan-translation of the final manga chapter where Ranma accepts his curse as the canon for this story. It's how I read the series first, and it's my personal preferred takeaway from the end of the manga, so we're using it here. Also as another note, as with many Ranma fics, I'm pulling from a blend of the anime and manga canons; my take being that unless something in the anime contradicts something in the manga, they can coexist peacefully in one big canon. So, I promise I didn't forget about Ling-Ling and

Lung-Lung in the line about Shampoo being an only child. Whether or not they're actually Shampoo's sisters is a little hazy IIRC, and TBH they're not going to show up in this fic anyway, so we're just going with a "we look up to you as a sister" relationship for them with Shampoo. Anyway, thank you so much for reading, and I hope you enjoyed the chapter!

Having Pork for Dinner

Chapter Summary

Ryoga comes back to the Tendo Dojo, and has an absolutely no-good time. Meanwhile, Ranma and Shampoo do their best to keep up appearances; Ryoga isn't the only one who hams it up here.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ranma Saotome awoke to the pattering of rain on the window. She groggily opened her eyes and saw that the sun had not risen yet and, with a yawn, decided it was far too early to be awake. She tried her best to fall back to sleep, but the sound of running water made that…more difficult than she had hoped. She tried her best to ignore bladder, but the solidarity it held with the rain outside was too strong for the redhead to overcome, and this was one battle in which Ranma Saotome had to concede defeat.

Ranma gingerly wiggled herself free of the grapple Akane had put her in before they fell asleep; one of the many advantages of being in girl form was that it was easier for Ranma to be the little spoon. Akane, thankfully, slept like a rock, and Ranma was able to deftly slip out of her arms and tiptoe out of her room without waking her.

After finishing up in the restroom, Ranma yawned silently and stretched her arms and legs before padding her way back down the hall to rejoin Akane in peaceful slumber. Though Ranma and her father had officially moved back in with Nodoka after she had learned about their curses, she had been living with the Tendos once more over the summer. After living together as a family for the first time in over a decade, Genma and Nodoka realized that, in the time they had spent apart, they had grown so distant that they hardly knew each other as people anymore. So, as was his solution to all predicaments, Genma proposed that he and Nodoka take a long trip together, just the two of them. That way, they could make up for lost time and reconnect as husband and wife as they traveled across Japan and saw all the marvelous sights the country had to offer. Nodoka (reluctantly) agreed, and the two set off nearly two months ago, with no set return date.

Ranma was saddened that her father had whisked her mother away so quickly after she had finally gotten to live with her again, but on the plus side, it meant her dad would also be out of the picture for a while. No fighting over food, no having to deal with his kleptomania, no ‘boy’ this or ‘my ungrateful son’ that; it certainly helped her cope with her mother being gone, and also emboldened her to be more openly feminine when she felt like it. And, as another bonus, it meant she and Akane could live under the same roof again. Sure, it was great to have the company of the whole Tendo family: Kasumi’s kindness and cooking, Soun’s reassuring words and fatherly energy, and Nabiki’s…..snarky remarks? But being farther away from Akane was what bothered Ranma the most about moving in with her mother, and now she could be closer to Akane than ever. In more

ways than one.

As Ranma reached for the knob on Akane's door, she heard something that sounded like it came from outside: rustling in the bushes, then very gentle footsteps on the *engawa* facing the back yard. She then heard what sounded like scratching at the sliding doors - something was trying to get inside, but what? She moved as quickly as she could without being noisy through the hallway and down the stairs, and into the *washitsu.* The noise coming from the other side of the door got louder, as whatever was scratching got more frantic as it heard Ranma get closer. Ranma reached for the *shoji* slowly and placed her hand on one of the doors. Then, hoping to scare away any intruder or animal that may be on the other side, slammed it open as quickly as she could, to find……

Ryoga, in his pig form, soaking wet and shivering from the rain.

"Oh, it's *you* ," Ranma said coldly, as Ryoga looked at her; his porcine eyes welled with tears. Ranma pursed her lips, and then slid the doors shut once more, leaving Ryoga outside. After several seconds of loud, pathetic *bwee-ing,* she sighed and opened the *ryoji* again. "Fine! You can come in. Don't say I never did nothin' for ya."

Ryoga's eyes glistened as he stared up at Ranma, halfway expecting her to shut him out again. But instead she crossed her arms in front of herself and tapped her foot impatiently. "Well, are ya gonna come in or what?" Ryoga quickly trotted inside and plopped down near the dining table.

Ranma closed the door and then spun on her heels to face the black piglet now sitting in the common room. Ryoga was soaking wet and shivering, and though Ranma initially was tempted to call out Ryoga for being dramatic, it had been raining for a while and she was sure Ryoga had been wandering all night to find the dojo. Even if Ryoga were hamming it up, he was legitimately pathetic; she couldn't stay mad at him, even though she really wanted to. Ranma sighed and ran her fingers through her bangs, "Alright, lemme get you a towel and I'll heat up some water."

Ranma went into the kitchen and started heating a kettle on the stove. She grabbed a tea towel from a drawer and returned to Ryoga. "Hold still porkbreath, yer drippin' all over the floor," she said as she patted her tiny rival dry. Ryoga turned away from Ranma and closed his eyes, his body going stiff at her touch. Ranma leaned over and saw that, even though normal pigs could not do such a thing, Ryoga's face had turned bright red.

"Oh man are you blushing? For real? Over this?" Ranma guffawed. And just like that, she was frustrated with Ryoga again. "I bet that's why you trekked over here in the first place, you were feelin' sorry for yourself and wanted to snuggle up to-"

“Ranma, what are you up to now?” Akane, with impeccable timing as always, sleepily rubbed her eyes as she shuffled into the *washitsu.* Ranma and Ryoga both snapped their heads up to meet Akane’s gaze. “Oh, you found P-Chan! I was so worried, I haven’t seen him in months!” Akane said excitedly. “And you’re drying him off? That’s….uncharacteristically nice of you, Ranma!”

Ranma whapped Ryoga on the head with her towel. “Well, the little runt looked so pathetic I felt sorry for him, what can I say?” she said with a shrug. “‘Sides, he was gonna get the whole house wet if I didn’t.”

“Oh poor baby, you were caught out in the rain, weren’t you,” Akane said as she walked over to where the rivals were sitting and then scooped Ryoga into her arms. Ryoga blushed even redder than he had before. “Well, don’t worry, you’re safe inside now.” Akane scritched Ryoga between his ears, and then looked back up to Ranma and smiled. “Should we get back to bed, then?”

“B-bed?!? You still wanna sleep with that little dweeb, even after he ran away from you for three months?” Ranma asked, deeply annoyed. Ryoga stuck his tongue out at Ranma while still nestled inside Akane’s arms. “What if he went feral? What if he got rabies or somethin’?” Ranma then crossed her arms in protest.

Akane sighed and shook her head. “Honestly Ranma, I still don’t understand why you’re so jealous of P-Chan. He’s *just* a little pig, right?”

Ryoga let out a tiny sigh upon hearing Akane’s remark.

“And besides,” Akane said, moving closer to Ranma, “there’s still plenty of room to share.” She said, tracing her finger down Ranma’s arm.

Ranma tried to keep looking away from Akane to pout, but she quickly relented and her eyes darted back to meet her fiance’s. She blushed slightly. The red-haired girl then turned to face both Akane and Ryoga, and smirked. “Ya hear that bacon bits? You ain’t the only one gettin’ snuggles around here anymore,” she said, booping Ryoga snout just a little too hard. As much as she hated the idea of sharing a bed with her archrival, this was an excellent opportunity to gloat. And besides, he would be in his cursed form the whole time, how bad could it be?

Ryoga, on the other hand, was mortified. His eyes narrowed and got even beadier than normal, and all the color drained from his face. Not only was he going to be stuck as P-Chan the entire night, but now he couldn’t even use his position as Akane’s pet to get back at Ranma! And Akane and Ranma were sleeping in the same bed now? When did that happen?!

Ryoga squealed as Akane carried him off to bed. “It’s okay P-Chan! You’re safe now, I promise!” Akane said as she tickled Ryoga’s belly in an attempt to calm down her pet. It did not work.

“Uhh, I’ll meetcha in a sec!” Ranma said to Akane, as she waited for her fiance to start climbing the steps to the second floor. She then shut off the stove and dumped the kettle of water she had been heating for Ryoga, and ran to join Akane, and Ryoga, in bed.

Ryoga stared into the darkness of Akane’s bedroom as he laid awake at the foot of her bed. Akane and Ranma had turned off the lights and fallen back to sleep over an hour ago, and yet he couldn’t do the same. He turned his head back to look at the sleeping pair: Ranma was curled up beside Akane, who had wrapped her arms around him in a caring embrace. Ryoga sighed, and turned back to staring at Akane’s dresser.

He had so many questions. When did Ranma and Akane start getting along so well, let alone start sleeping together? Why was Ranma staying with the Tendos again when he and his father had moved out before the attempted wedding? Why was Ranma sleeping in his girl form? Why was Akane…..like *that* ?

Ryoga was puzzled in so many ways, but unfortunately he wasn’t able to get any answers to his questions in his current state. He sighed heavily. How pathetic he was, a martial artist, trapped in the form of a helpless pet piglet, stuck in the bedroom of a sleeping teenage girl. And worst of all, now the one advantage of being a pet had been completely negated by his archrival. The man who had taken everything else from him had now finally succeeded in stealing away from him the first woman he had ever loved. It was enough anguish to fuel a True *Shishi Hokodan* .

But, alas, such an attack would likely completely destroy the Tendo dojo, and Akane herself, in addition to Ranma. And besides, Ryoga doubted he could perform his signature technique in pig form anyway. Completely resigned to his fate of depression and indignity, Ryoga felt his eyes get heavy, and he finally drifted off to sleep.

The rain cleared up by the time morning had come, and a sunbeam from Akane’s window met Ranma’s face. She stirred slowly as the sunlight slowly returned her to the waking world, and she opened her eyes to see her fiance’s still-sleeping face inches away from her own. Ever the restless sleeper, Akane had shifted positions in her sleep, and her arms were no longer wrapped around the smaller girl next to her. Ranma watched Akane sleep for a few moments, and smiled to herself. “Mornin’ ‘Kane,” she said, fully expecting the blue-haired girl to stay asleep a little while longer.

“And good mornin’ to you too, P-Ch-” Ranma said sarcastically as she reached her foot down to the end of the bed to kick her rival awake. However, she noticed the piglet was absent from where he was last night. She fumbled around with her leg to find Ryoga, but he was no longer at the foot of the bed. Ranma looked down to Akane’s torso to see if Ryoga had snuck up to cuddle with her when she wasn’t looking, but he wasn’t there either.

It was only then that Ranma noticed that the thing she felt at her bosom *wasn’t Akane’s arm.* Instead, Ryoga, who did indeed move closer to snuggle up to Akane the previous night, had….missed his mark.

Ranma yelled loudly, which awoke Ryoga with a start. Ryoga noticed who he had been sleeping next to, and went catatonic with embarrassment. Ranma grabbed Ryoga by his bandana, and slammed him onto the floor as she jumped out of bed. He squealed loudly, and began darting around Akane’s bedroom, with Ranma in tow trying to catch him.

“You pig! When I catch you I’m gonna fry your ass and serve it for breakfast!!!”

The commotion woke up Akane, first to little hooves on her face, and then to two feet narrowly missing her as they jumped off of her bed. Annoyed to have to wake up to this chaos after things being so quiet for three months, Akane grabbed her desk lamp from her desk and whacked Ranma over the head with it. Ryoga then leapt into her arms, bwee-ing unconsolably.

“Ranma! Do we really have to start this again now that P-Chan is home?!” Akane asked loudly as she scratched Ryoga under his chin.

“Hey! He started it! It ain’t my fault the little pervert can’t keep his trotters to himself!” Ranma yelled back, rubbing her head in pain. “I caught him coppin’ a feel while I was sleeping! I bet he woulda done the same ta you too!”

“How many times do we have to go over this, Ranma? He can’t be a pervert because he’s not human! He’s only a little piglet, right P-Chan?” said Akane. Ryoga was still in shock, otherwise Akane’s attestation would have hurt him more deeply. “Now, unless there’s something you’re not telling me about my pet, let’s drop it, okay?”

Ranma grumbled, but let the issue of being felt up by her rival in the middle of the night go, for Akane’s sake. She sighed, and looked back at the other girl. “You’re right Akane, I’m sorry. I overreacted ‘cause I’m so used ta bein’ on edge when Happosai is around.” She moved closer to Akane, and poked Ryoga in his belly. “P-Chan is just a widdle baby piggie, and that’s *that* .”

Ranma's words snapped Ryoga back to reality, and he looked up to the redhead towering above him as she smirked smugly. More and more, coming back to the Tendo Dojo felt like the biggest mistake he had ever made in his life.

A week passed, and Ryoga tried his best to settle into the new normal he experienced at the Tendo residence. Every morning after breakfast, he would watch Ranma and Akane spar in the dojo. However, it was different from how the two used to "spar," where Akane would do her best to clobber Ranma, and he would simply duck out of the way and taunt her. Now, it seemed much more constructive, with Ranma giving pointers to Akane on how to improve what she already knew, and even discussing having Akane learn some new techniques as well. Obviously, Ranma was significantly more skilled than Akane was, but it was refreshing to see that he seemed to be more focused now on helping Akane better herself, rather than simply letting her chase him around to no avail.

Likewise, it also looked as though more people than usual had been taking classes at the Tendo Dojo. For much of the time Ryoga had known Akane, her family's business had been…well, not great at all. The Tendos frequently had money problems, which were only exacerbated by the Saotomes moving in, and it always seemed as though Nabiki and her schemes were the only thing between the Tendo family and bankruptcy. Now, the dojo was hosting at least one class on most nights, with Soun and Akane alternating their teaching duties. Whether the surge in business was due to the people of Nerima figuring out the Tendo Dojo was the epicenter of the super-powered martial arts battles they had been witnessing for a year, or because those battles had finally stopped, was no matter. People came and the Tendos taught.

However, some mayhem did occur, as Shampoo stopped by twice in the few days since Ryoga had returned to the Tendo household: once to deliver food to Ranma and make a scene out of cuddling up to him, and another time where she and Akane fought in the courtyard, again making a scene over Ranma. Ryoga figured Shampoo was up to her old tricks again, just as he had tried to return to his own normalcy after keeping his distance for three months. He did find it a little strange that Ranma wasn't as harsh toward Shampoo as he had been when they all first met up again nearly two weeks prior, but he paid it no mind. Ranma was always meaner to him than anyone else, so it made perfect sense.

But what was definitely strangest of all was the fact that Ranma spent at least half of his time in girl form, and not simply because he was waiting for a kettle to boil after getting caught in the rain or splashed by a passerby. Ranma was willingly not transforming back to his male form. Moreso, he was willingly transforming into his girl form at times as well, even when he wasn't trying to deceive someone or con them out of free food. And he couldn't ask why Ranma was suddenly behaving this way, because he never offered to change Ryoga back when he did finally change back into his taller, black-haired self.

Instead, Ryoga went to bed every night, still in pig form, sleeping a respectful distance away from Ranma and Akane as they continued to cuddle together in Akane's bedroom. And every night, he lay awake, wondering if he'd ever be able to return to human form. He thought, briefly, that this fate may be better than being the shy, gullible, depressed lost boy he had been before. He may have been a widdle baby piggy, but at least he wasn't alone any more.

This thought was quashed the next day when Ranma finally offered Ryoga some hot water. "Alright porkbutt, that's probably enough torture for now," Ranma said as she poured hot water out of a kettle onto Ryoga after Akane had gone down to the training hall to teach a class.

For the first time in a week, Ryoga was human again. He stared at his hands as they trembled slightly; what a foreign feeling it was to have digits again after having hooves for what felt like an eternity. His contemplation of his fingers ended abruptly as Ranma threw Ryoga's trademark yellow tunic over his head. "Here, I found these in an alley a couple'a days ago. Can't go trottin' around with just yer bandana on now, can ya?"

Ryoga blushed silently without turning around, as Ranma closed the bedroom door behind her to give the Lost Boy some privacy.

A few minutes later, Ryoga emerged to find Ranma waiting in the hallway for him. "Aren't you going to change too?" he asked the redhead in front of him.

"What, is there somethin' on my shirt?" Ranma asked, examining her red sleeveless silk top for unseen stains.

"No, back into your normal form," Ryoga replied.

"Oh! Yeah, right, I…guess I should go do that," Ranma said sheepishly. "I'll, uh, have to go boil some more water." Ranma scurried down the hallway with the kettle in hand. Ryoga wondered why Ranma hadn't put enough water in the kettle for the both of them in the first place, but didn't press the issue. He'd have plenty of time to ask his burning questions now that he could finally speak again.

Ryoga headed downstairs to join Ranma in the kitchen. Or at least, that was his intention. Instead, he spent entirely too long wandering the halls of the Tendo residence, hopelessly lost even trying to find another room in the house. By the time he finally found Ranma, her kettle had finished heating up.

“Nice a’ you to finally show up,” Ranma quipped as Ryoga entered the kitchen. She reached over to the stove and turned off the burner her kettle was sitting on, and looked at it as steam wafted from its spout. She slowly reached toward the handle, almost afraid to touch it, as if it were a snarling animal she was wary to pet. But knowing Ryoga was watching her, Ranma grabbed the kettle and poured its contents over herself. She felt herself grow taller and broader, and was extra-aware of the sensations of her clothing on her body as it became tighter in certain places and looser in others. She looked down at her flat chest, and larger hands, and even though the view was nothing she wasn’t used to, she still felt deeply uncomfortable in her own skin.

‘Yep, knew this would be a mistake,’ Ranma thought to herself. ‘But here we are anyway.’

Ranma turned around to face Ryoga, who wisely had not moved from the spot he had been standing in. “Ahhh, much better!” Ranma lied. “Hey, can you toss me that?” She pointed to the towel she had brought with her, resting on the island in the middle of the room. Ryoga threw it to Ranma, and she began to dry her now-black hair.

The two stood in silence for several seconds, before Ryoga broke the tension in the air. “Why did you turn me back?” he asked, not quite making eye contact with the person across the room from him. “You were clearly reveling in my misery.”

“Hmm? Well I already told ya, I figured you’d probably had enough’a being P-Chan for a while, so I took pity on ya,” Ranma said, placing her used towel on the counter next to her; something that Kasumi would take much chagrin with later. “And it was gettin’ old watchin’ you mope around the dojo all day anyway.”

“I suppose I deserved all that, considering how I acted earlier this week. And two weeks ago,” He said, still not looking directly at Ranma as he spoke. “And…all the times before too.”

Ranma blinked twice in surprise. She was expecting the usual self-pity from Ryoga, but had not anticipated the self-awareness. It *almost* sounded like an apology, instead of the typical ‘woe is me’ attitude Ryoga generally exuded. She smiled, half-cockily, half-genuinely. “Hey, ya did yer time, so don’t worry about it no more. I promise I’ll stop bein’ a bitch to ya if you stop sulking.”

Now that was a word Ryoga had never heard Ranma call herself before. “Ranma, why are you…” he began to ask, before Ranma swiftly cut him off.

“Anyway, I also changed ya back because I was plannin’ on goin’ over to the *Nekohanten* for some noodles, and Akane can’t come since she’s busy with her class,” Ranma said, counterattacking Ryoga’s half-formulated question. “You wanna come with instead?”

A week of being deliberately forced to stay in his cursed form, followed by an invitation to dinner? Ryoga's relationship with Ranma could pivot from being enemies to friends surprisingly quickly, but this was sudden even by their standards. Ryoga sighed, and finally looked up to meet Ranma in the eye. "Sure, why not?"

Ranma and Ryoga arrived at the *Nekohanten* only slightly later than Ranma had wanted. Ryoga tried to take as many wrong turns as possible on the way there, but Ranma knew this would happen and was equally as determined to keep him on the right path. It was early in the evening, before the dinner rush, and the restaurant was mostly empty. The few patrons in the cafe, recognizing the two martial artists at the entrance, started eating their meals more quickly to try to get out before any shenanigans started.

" *Nihao, airen!"* Shampoo called out as she rushed from the kitchen to tackle-hug Ranma. "Shampoo was waiting to see you again! It been too long!"

"Cut it out Shampoo!" Ranma replied, trying to squirm her way out of the other girl's grasp. "It's only been like three days!"

"Any time is too long without seeing *airen* !" Shampoo exclaimed, nuzzling up to her prey.

"Ya know what would really make me happy, Shampoo?" Ranma asked, "If me an' Ryoga here could grab a bite ta eat without making a scene!"

Ryoga had been doing his best to stay away from the two entangled teens next to him, but out of the corner of his eye he could have sworn he saw Ranma….wink at Shampoo? Ryoga visually scoured the restaurant as he and Ranma were escorted to a table, convinced he was on one of those hidden camera shows with how strangely everyone was acting.

"Ahh, son-in-law! How nice to see you again so soon!" a voice shouted from behind the pair of black-haired martial artists. Cologne placed two orders on the counter of the kitchen window, their recipients suddenly ordering their food to go. "And you brought Ryoga with you too! How nice to see you two boys finally getting along."

"Haha, yep, that's me an' Ryoga!" Ranma said, trying not to wince at being called a boy. "Best buds! Pals forever!"

“Well, I’m just happy you’ve been so much more friendly lately! We missed you around here, and Shampoo was just heartbroken when you were distant for so long,” Cologne mused. “She’s been in such a better mood since you started coming by again. I almost began to worry that Shampoo would lose interest and go after a different man! It’s nice to see you finally start caring for your future bride.”

Cologne quickly washed a stack of dirty dishes, before grabbing the bussing tray next to the sink and tapping it on the counter. “Mousse! Come out here and clear these tables! I want us to be picture perfect for the dinner rush!”

From the darkness of the storeroom Mousse emerged, and shot a glare toward Ranma and Ryoga as he picked up the plastic tray that had summoned him. Or, at least he intended to, were he wearing his glasses. Instead, he intimidated the last two other customers in the restaurant into fleeing without finishing their food.

“What’ll it be today, boys? Ryoga, we have *tonkotsu* ramen on special tonight, I’m sure you’ll love it!” Cologne said, cackling to herself.

Ryoga sighed and faked a slight smile. “Heh, that joke gets funnier every time I hear it,” he said half-heartedly.

Ranma and Ryoga ordered their food and ate in relative silence, beyond the occasional small chat with Cologne and false flirtation from Shampoo. For the entire meal, Ryoga deeply wanted to asked all the burning questions he’d had from the days prior, but even he had enough tact to know this was a conversation best held in private. Ranma ate with her usual ferver, and finished her ramen before Ryoga reached his halfway point. Ranma was about to chide Ryoga about being a slow eater, but a tug at her sleeve interrupted this plan.

“Umm, *airen,* Shampoo want to show you something,” Shampoo said coyly. “Something….in private.”

Ranma loudly gulped, and looked to Ryoga. “You go off, I still have plenty of noodles left to finish,” Ryoga said, peering into his reflection in his ramen broth. Ranma followed Shampoo into the back of the restaurant, catching a glance of Cologne wagging her eyebrows at her as she passed the kitchen window.

Shampoo led Ranma down a hall in the corner of the dining room and opened the door to a storage closet. She shoved Ranma inside, closing the door behind her as she entered. Were this only a few weeks earlier, Ranma would have been significantly more anxious about being alone in a dark

room with Shampoo.

“Ranma! I think Great-Grandmother is suspicious!” Shampoo whispered.

“Huh? What makes you think that? We’ve been puttin’ on a great show!” Ranma replied in a low voice.

“She said that I was losing interest! She must know I called things off!” Shampoo exclaimed as quietly as she could. “ *Aiya,* this is no good!”

Ranma imagined Shampoo was likely holding her head in panic; she couldn’t actually see what she was doing, due to there being zero light in the storage closet. “Calm down Shampoo, I’m sure that ain’t what it is! She said I was takin’ care a’ ya or whatever right after! I’m sure she’s just givin’ me a hard time like she always does.”

Shampoo let out a quiet sigh. “I hope you are right, because if we get discovered, Great-Grandmother’s words will be the least of our worries.”

“Listen, I’m sure it’ll be fine!” Ranma said, her mouth writing a check that she hoped she could cash. “We’ve been keepin’ up appearances plenty, an’ I even brought Ryoga along as a witness to our perfect act! Things are gonna be a-”

Just then, the doorknob jiggled, and blinding light flooded the closet.

“-okay,” Ranma finished her statement a moment too late. In the doorway, interrupting their private conversation, stood…

Ryoga, who looked as startled as Ranma and Shampoo did. “Oh, uh, I’m so sorry! I was just looking for the bathroom!” he said, instantly sweaty with anxiety. His mind was so overwhelmed with embarrassment that it did not even register that Ranma and Shampoo had *not* been all over each other in this dark room.

“Ugh! Shampoo would tell Piggy where it is but he would just get lost again!” Shampoo grumbled, dropping back into character. “Let Shampoo show!” She and Ranma both came out of the closet, and Shampoo grabbed Ryoga’s hand to lead him to his destination.

‘Well that was too close for comfort,’ Ranma thought to herself as she closed the closet door behind her and headed back to her table. She waited entirely too long for her dinner companion to rejoin her as he struggled to find his way back to where they were sitting. In the meantime, she summoned Shampoo over to her table, both to reassure her once more that everything was going to be okay, and to ask a small favor of her.

Ryoga finally returned from the restroom, and finished his meal in silence. As the Lost Boy put down his chopsticks, Shampoo returned with a glass of water. “Here you go, *airen,* Shampoo know you thirsty, so she bring you-” Shampoo began to say, before she “tripped”, and the glass flew from her hand. It splashed Ranma, and like a sigh of relief, it activated her curse.

“Ahh geez Shampoo,” Ranma said, in a voice that no longer sounded like nails on a chalkboard to her ears.

“Still a little flustered, eh granddaughter?” Cologne teased from the kitchen window. “Just a moment, let me heat some water up for you, sonny-boy.”

“Oh, that’s okay!” Ranma hurriedly replied. “I…I was gonna take a bath when I got home anyway, so no need!” She stood up and grabbed Ryoga’s wrist. “Well, we’ll be seein’ you all later! Thanks for the food granny! You can put it on my tab!”

Cologne sighed, knowing she’d never get paid for those meals. “You’re just lucky you’re family, son-in-law. Don’t be a stranger!”

“See ya Shampoo! Smell ya later, Mousse!” Ranma yelled as she yanked Ryoga out the front door and into the streets of Furinkan.

Ranma and Ryoga made their way back to the Tendo Dojo. Ranma would have preferred to keep her distance from her rival, but seeing as she had to constantly nudge him back on track to get home, she had to stay close.

Ryoga kept quiet for the first half of their journey, until he had finally rehearsed what he was going to say enough times in his head to feel comfortable attempting to say it. “Ranma, what happened back there?”

Ranma looked up toward Ryoga, now that he stood more than a full head taller than her. “Hmm? You mean back at the *Nekohanten* ? I had a lovely dinner with a friend an’ almost got taken advantage of by Shampoo. What else did it look like?”

“I mean,” Ryoga said, stopping in the middle of the footpath, “what happened with the glass of water? You and I both know you easily could have caught that glass, or dodged out of the way, but you let it splash you.”

Ranma pursed her lips. “Hey, you wouldn’t exactly be on yer a-game either if you had just got shoved in a closet by a girl!” she lied.

“And what about all the other times at the dojo, when you splashed yourself on purpose there too? Or when you would spend all day sometimes as a girl? What’s going on?”

Ranma didn’t answer. “Look, I’ll tell ya when you’re older. C’mon, let’s just get back, I’m sure Akane-” Ranma tried to pull Ryoga along by his wrist, but he didn’t budge. Ryoga was already stronger than Ranma when they were both male, let alone when she was in her cursed form, and he stayed put.

“Why are you dodging my questions?”

“‘Cause I don’t feel like answerin’ them.”

“Why are you and Akane suddenly so friendly? Why are you two sleeping together?”

“Ain’t none of yer business!”

“Why can’t you just answer me?! Why can’t you stand up and talk to me like a man?!”

That did it. Ranma let go of Ryoga’s arm and was silent for a moment, before turning around to face him.

“Because I *ain’t* a man!!!”

The two stood in silence. Ryoga noticed tears welling up in Ranma's eyes.

"At least, not all the time," Ranma said, more quietly. "And definitely not right now."

Ryoga had no idea how to react to this declaration. Ranma Saotome, who, for the entire time Ryoga had known him, had touted being the manliest man to ever be a man, was now saying that he *wasn't* a man? He remained silent, words failing him, as he watched Ranma wipe hi……her eyes and sniffle slightly.

"So yeah, there's yer answer. Happy now?" Ranma added, looking down at the pavement in front of her. "There's times I like bein' a girl, a lot of times actually! And right now and most of this past week's been one of 'em." She paused for a moment, before steeling her nerves and making eye contact with Ryoga. "So go on! Say whatever you wanna say, it ain't gonna change nothing!"

Ryoga's brain had finally finished rebooting. He looked to his archrival, his greatest foe, the most constant source of his misery: a tiny, redheaded girl, standing her ground in front of him. Here was a martial artist who could fuel *ki* blasts with her confidence, allowing herself to be vulnerable. The ultimate chauvinist, now embracing femininity. It was as if Ranma had become a totally different person. And yet…

It all made sense. In addition to all the masculine peacocking he was known for, Ranma Saotome was also someone who was happy to dress in women's clothing at the drop of a hat, and seemed to be far too comfortable flirting with men for someone who "hated" being a cute girl. Despite the constant protests, Ranma frequently seemed to be comfortable in female form, and only now did it click for Ryoga that it went deeper than surface level.

After a long, tense pause, Ryoga closed his eyes and smirked. "Well Ranma, you're right, nothing I say will change anything." He opened his eyes, and stepped closer to Ranma. She tensed herself, preparing herself for a fight. Ryoga did lay hands on her, but instead of moving to attack, he placed his palms on Ranma's shoulders. "You're my rival, and my…..my friend. No matter what." Ryoga was going to finally say something cool to a girl, damnit, even if that girl was Ranma.

Ranma began to tear up again. Ryoga instinctively pulled his hands back and began to panic. "Oh no, I'm sorry, don't cry! I didn't mean to say anything to upset you!"

Ranma laughed as she wiped her eyes. "No you idiot, I'm cryin' 'cause I'm….happy! Geez, you really know nothin' about girls, huh?" She wasn't wrong.

Ryoga put his hand behind his head and shyly joined Ranma in laughter.

“Well, ‘friend,’ you wanna come back to the dojo with me? In human form this time?" Ranma asked. “There, uh, more stuff goin' on lately that I should tell ya. Also, I’m sure Akane would love ta see you, and Kasumi’s probably cookin’ dinner!"

Ryoga, startled by this kind offer, was cautious for a moment, before smiling back at Ranma. “Sure, why not? It’ll be nice to properly see everyone again.”

Ranma grabbed Ryoga by his wrist and lead him back to the dojo.

“Also, how can you be hungry already? We just ate!”

Back at the *Nekohanten* , the dinner rush had begun, and Shampoo, Cologne, and Mousse all settled into their routines for another busy night at the restaurant. As the night grew longer, Mousse offered to inspect the restrooms in a spare moment between bussing tables, much to Cologne’s surprise and delight. He headed over to the storage closet in the far corner of the dining room, and switched the lights on as he closed the door behind him.

Mousse grabbed a bottle of floor cleaner and emptied some into a mop bucket on the floor. He replaced the bottle, and then picked up a second, identical-looking bottle from the same shelf. The spectacled boy unscrewed a false bottom on the bottle, and removed from it a small tape recorder that had reached the end of its recording time. He rewound it all the way, and pressed fast-forward through the silent parts of the recording, stopping every so often to listen to the playback. He did this for several minutes, until he found what he was looking for.

“-said that I was losing interest! She must know I called things off!” the tape recorder repeated Shampoo’s words from earlier.

“Bingo,” Mousse said with a smirk. Being a master of hidden weapon combat, Mousse was *naturally* a master of hiding other things as well, and now buying all of those tape recorders and placing them in secluded parts of the restaurant had finally paid off.

“ *Aiya,* this is no good!” the playback continued before Mousse stopped it, and he placed the device into his sleeve for safe-keeping. Even though he had to clean the restrooms, Mousse was in

a very good mood for the rest of the night.

Chapter End Notes

The longest chapter yet! Isn't talking about your feelings nice, instead of making assumptions and yelling? What a good friend Ryoga turned out to be! Unlike Mousse, who seems to be determined to ruin something nice that's happening to his friends for once in their lives. Will he totally duck everything up? We'll find out soon! Thanks again for reading! I'm having a lot of fun writing this fic, and I hope you all enjoy it : 3

End Notes

Hello friends! This is the first fanfic I've written in like, 15 years, so I hope it's okay! This whole story was inspired by my desire to do better by Shampoo; a character who I honestly don't like very much in the main series canon. So I challenged myself to write a version of her that I not only enjoy, but that I feel is more respectful to her as a character - especially in spite of the exoticized way she is depicted in the English translation of the series. So enjoy as I write a bunch of words about a character who I did not care for until now, and as I take my dedication to my beloved gender anime to new levels. I hope you liked this chapter, and will continue to enjoy the ones to follow!

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